

Remarks Following a Discussion on Health Care Reform

July 20, 2009

Hello, everybody. Please have a seat. Well, I just first of all want to thank the Children's Hospital for hosting us today, and I want to thank the participants: Joseph Wright, Brian Jacobs, Yewande Johnson, Michael Knappe, Regina Hartridge, and Kathleen Quigley.

I just had the opportunity to talk to doctors, nurses, physician's assistants, and administrators at this extraordinary institution. We spoke about some of the strains on our health care system and some of the strains our health care system places on parents with sick children.

We spoke about the amount of time and money wasted on insurance-driven bureaucracy. We spoke about the growing number of Americans who are uninsured and underinsured. We spoke about what's wrong with a system where women can't always afford maternity care and parents can't afford checkups for their kids and end up seeking treatment in emergency rooms like the ones here at Children's. We spoke about the fact that it's very hard even for families who have health insurance to access primary care physicians and pediatricians. In a city like Washington, DC, you've got all the doctors in one half of the city, very few doctors in the other half of the city. And part of that has to do with just the manner in which reimbursement is taking place and the disincentives for doctors, nurses, and physician's assistants in caring for those who are most in need. And we spoke about where we're headed if we once again delay and defer health insurance reform.

Now, these health care professionals are doing heroic work each and every day to save the lives of America's children. But they're being forced to fight through a system that works better for drug companies and insurance companies than for the American people that all these wonderful health professionals entered their profession to serve.

And over the past decade, premiums have doubled in America, out-of-pocket costs have shot up by a third, deductibles have continued to climb. And yet even as America's families have been battered by spiraling health care costs, health insurance companies and their executives have reaped windfall profits from a broken system.

Now, we've talked this problem to death, year after year. But unless we act—and act now—none of this will change. Just a quick statistic I heard about this hospital: Just a few years ago, there were approximately 50,000 people coming into the emergency room. Now they've got 85,000. There's been almost a doubling of emergency room care in a relatively short span of time, which is putting enormous strains on the system as a whole. That's the status quo, and it's only going to get worse.

If we do nothing, then families will spend more and more of their income for less and less care; the number of people who lose their insurance because they've lost or changed jobs will continue to grow; more children will be denied coverage on account of asthma or a heart condition; jobs will be lost, take-home pay will be lower, businesses will shutter, and we will continue to waste hundreds of billions of dollars on insurance company boondoggles and inefficiencies that add to our financial burdens without making us any healthier.

So the need for reform is urgent and it is indisputable. No one denies that we're on an unsustainable path. We all know there are more efficient ways of doing it. We just—I spoke to

the chief information officer here at the hospital, and he talked about some wonderful ways in which we could potentially gather up electronic medical records and information for every child, not just that comes to this hospital but in the entire region, and how much money could be saved and how the health of these kids could be improved. But it requires an investment.

Now, there are some in these—this town who are content to perpetuate the status quo, are in fact fighting reform on behalf of powerful special interests. There are others who recognize the problem, but believe—or perhaps, hope—that we can put off the hard work of insurance reform for another day, another year, and another decade.

Just the other day, one Republican Senator said, and I'm quoting him now, "If we're able to stop Obama on this, it will be his Waterloo. It will break him." Think about that: This isn't about me; this isn't about politics. This is about a health care system that is breaking America's families, breaking America's businesses, and breaking America's economy.

And we can't afford the politics of delay and defeat when it comes to health care. Not this time—not now. There are too many lives and livelihoods at stake. There are too many families who will be crushed if insurance premiums continue to rise three times as fast as wages. There are too many businesses that will be forced to shed workers, scale back benefits, or drop coverage unless we get spiraling health care costs under control.

The reforms we seek would bring greater competition, choice, savings, and inefficiencies [efficiencies]^{*} to our health care system and greater stability and security to America's families and businesses. For the average American, it will mean lower costs, more options, and coverage you can count on. It will save you and your family money, if we have a more efficient health care system. You won't have to worry about being priced out of the market. You won't have to worry about one illness leading your family into financial ruin. You won't have to worry that you won't be able to afford treatment for a child who gets sick.

We can and we must make all these reforms, and we can do it in a way that does not add to our deficits over the next decade. I've said this before. Let me repeat: The bill I sign must reflect my commitment and the commitment of Congress to slow the growth of health care costs over the long run. That's how we can ensure that health care reforms strengthens our national—our Nation's fiscal health at the same time.

Now, we always knew that passing health care reform wouldn't be easy. We always knew that doing what is right would be hard. There's just a tendency towards inertia in this town. I understand that as well as anybody. But we're a country that chooses the harder right over the easier wrong. That's what we have to do this time. We have to do that once more.

So let's fight our way through the politics of the moment. Let's pass reform by the end of this year. Let's commit ourselves to delivering our country a better future. And that future will be seen in a place like Children's Hospital, when young people are getting the care that they deserve and they need, when they need it, and we don't have an overcrowded emergency room that's putting enormous burdens on this excellent institution. I think we can accomplish that, but we're going to have to do some work over the next few weeks and the next few months.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:25 p.m. at Children's National Medical Center. In his remarks, he referred to Joseph L. Wright, senior vice president, Child Health Advocacy

^{*} White House correction.

Institute, Brian Jacobs, vice president and chief medical information officer, Yewande J. Johnson, pediatric anesthesiologist, Michael Knapp, executive director, Emergency Medicine Trauma Services, Kathleen Quigley, physician assistant, Division of Neurosurgery, Children's National Medical Center; Regina Hartridge, Children's Health Project of the District of Columbia; and Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina.

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